



BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE FUTURE

A Vermont business proves you don't have to be big or high-tech to enjoy high-tech communications

by D.E. Munson

"Ring. Ring. Hello Graham, this is Jeanice. How are you today?"

Two people, teacher and student, chat with each other in mock conversation over telephones. The teacher is Jeanice Garfield, the energetic founder of what is probably Springfield, Vt.'s most respected child care center. Graham is a five-year-old student in Garfield's *Building Blocks* preschool.

They lean toward each other, nose-to-nose, over a small, round table next to an old upright piano in one of the activity rooms. The lesson today: how to talk properly on the telephone; how to answer, what to say, how to enunciate. As they carry on their conversation, sunlight pours through a window near them. It illuminates potted plants, whale bones, kites and airplanes, an indoor tree house—evidence of Garfield's desire for her students to explore and investigate, to be active in their own learning.

If you spend any time with Jeanice Garfield, it quickly becomes apparent that she is uncompromising when it comes to her career and business. When she received her education degree from the Vermont State College System, teaching jobs were scarce in Springfield, a small community of 10,000 in the southeastern part of the state. So she opened *Building Blocks* in January 1981. A dozen children were enrolled. A child care center, *The Children's House*, followed three-and-a-half years later. Garfield and her staff of 12 now teach and care for 125 youngsters.

Needless to say, managing the daily affairs of more than 100 children in two schools is a daunting task. Just knowing where everyone is can consume lots of energy. Yet, there is also a critical need for Garfield and her staff to be immediately available for calls from parents, local school officials, suppliers, delivery people, etc. Efficient telephone service is critical. Six months ago, it



Many people would find it difficult to do what businesswoman Jeanice Garfield does everyday: oversee the child care of 125 youngsters and cope with the rigors of running a business. Garfield manages both, thanks in part to an efficient communications system.

became apparent that the telephone system serving *The Children's House* and *Building Blocks* needed to be upgraded.

To accommodate her business activity, Garfield had previously upgraded from one to six phones with two business lines. But the demands on the system were more than it could handle effectively. A simple task like transferring a call between the two schools was cumbersome at best.

Garfield called Contel for help, and after discussing her needs with Marketing Consultant Virginia Gundersen, decided on Contel's Centrex service.

Centrex is rapidly becoming a communications service of choice for many small- to mid-sized businesses. The reasons are straightforward: Centrex affords its users the same calling features of a PBX or key system without the major capital investment. The hardware and software that provide features like Call Pick-Up, Call Transfer, and Conference Calling, reside in the phone company's switching office.

The low investment risk is especially appealing for smaller businesses like

Garfield's, since Contel is responsible for the equipment's operation and maintenance.

Gundersen consulted with Garfield and her director on several occasions. "Jeanice and I discussed her specific needs and constraints," she said. "Basically, she needed to find an easier means of transferring calls between buildings or to her director's house.



"Another major concern was that the service had to be budget sensitive. I knew Centrex was her best solution before the end of our first meeting," Gundersen said.

In subsequent meetings, Gundersen and Garfield continued to detail specific features Garfield needed and how to use them. "We have call forwarding and use it all the time," Garfield said. "If necessary, we even use it between *The Children's House* and my director's house. When Debbie (Debbie Barton, Garfield's director) was on maternity leave, it was a godsend. If a parent called, we'd forward it to Debbie's house in Perkinsonville, 10 miles away.

"The Speed Dialing feature has also been very helpful. There are people we

call very often. I used to know all their numbers, but I've forgotten them now that it's so easy to store a code and press a button."

As she speaks, the children have gathered outside for a picnic on the porch under the watchful eyes of staff members Carolyn Brown and Heather Post. Two children have remained in the room with their teacher. Garfield excuses herself and takes the two aside to discuss an incident which occurred earlier in the day. She then asks if they need a hug, and sends them out to play.

"Parents must also be able to keep in touch with us at all times," she continued. "When a parent calls for me and I'm in another building, I can now be easily linked with them using Call Transfer.

"We have to know we have reliable service. And Centrex does provide that for us."

Garfield takes her approach to teaching very seriously. "There are still those who refer to us as babysitters. It's very important to understand that ours is not a role of just taking care of the kids. It's also a matter of educating the community. It's *not* babysitting.

"And the kids are not empty vessels to be filled. There are some very fine studies that show the validity of a proper early childhood education. And these two facilities work as closely together as possible to provide that education."

Garfield's style of child care stresses communication. Hence, she and her students conduct practice phone conversations. On a wall adjacent to the piano is a large blue poster displaying the alphabet in sign language. The poster is a fixture—for a reason.

Garfield explained. "Carol, one of my staff, has been here five years now, and she is deaf. One of my first projects was centered on my belief that these children are at the point in their lives where they're learning language. Learning to communicate. Young children need to use their hands and all of their senses to learn. With practice, they become very comfortable, and use to seeing people who don't look, walk, communicate, or interact the same way. The social implications are wonderful."

Some people would undoubtedly find it difficult to do what Garfield does everyday: oversee teaching 125 students and cope with the day-to-day rigors of running a business. Garfield manages both—with zeal and a little help from Contel's Centrex service. □



There is a critical need for the staff of Building Blocks and The Children's House to be immediately available for parents and school officials. The staff has found that Centrex service is tailor made for this kind of activity.